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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the fundamental characteristics of a sustainable community are economic security, ecological integrity, quality of life, and empowerment and responsibility. It also asserts that nurturing these characteristics within a rural school can forge stronger links to community, strengthen the local economic base, encourage students to live within the community, and increase the likelihood that the school will be adequately funded. A school can increase the economic security of its community by encouraging local and national businesses to set up branches within the school, by teaching entrepreneurialism, by establishing small student-run ventures, and by offering local and state incentives to attract business partnerships. Schools can contribute to ecological integrity by reflecting the culture, history, and materials of the community in its design. Schools must add to the quality of life as defined by the community. The paper also suggests that it is important that schools empower students with a sense of responsibility and decision making. Strategies for creating sustainable schools include: responding to the variation in types of rural communities; taking advantage of outside expertise; being sensitive to building design, construction, condition, and outfitting; broadening the search for resources and ideas beyond traditional thinking; assessing community assets; and investigating local, state, and federal funding and partnerships. (SAS)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

by

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Barbara Kent Lawrence, Ed.D.

As educators interested in improving school facilities and infrastructure, we can learn from practitioners of other disciplines such as ecology, town planning and economics. Applying their concept of sustainability suggests ways to make small rural schools more viable and enduring assets in their communities. The Sustainable Community Project at Tufts University identifies four fundamental characteristics of a sustainable community. Nurturing these characteristics within a rural school can forge stronger links to its community, strengthen the local economic base, encourage students to live within the community after graduation and increase the likelihood that the school will be adequately funded to maintain and improve its facilities and infrastructure.

Elizabeth Kline of the Sustainable Community Project identifies the following essential characteristics of a sustainable community:

ECONOMIC SECURITY:

A more sustainable community includes a variety of businesses, industries, and institutions which are environmentally sound (in all aspects), financially viable, provide training, education, and other forms of assistance to adjust to future needs, provide jobs and spend money within a community, and enable employees to have a voice in decisions which affect them. A more sustainable community also is one in which residents' money remains in the community.

ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY:

A more sustainable community is in harmony with natural systems by reducing and converting waste into non-harmful and beneficial purposes and by utilizing the natural ability of environmental resources for human needs without undermining their ability to function over time.

> QUALITY OF LIFE: A more sustainable community recognizes and supports people's evolving sense of well-being which includes a sense of belonging, a sense of place, sense of self-worth. Sense of safety, a sense of connection with nature, and provision of goods and services which meet their needs both as they define them and can be accommodated within the ecological integrity of natural systems.
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> EMPOWERMENT and RESPONSIBILITY: A more sustainable community enables people to feel empowered and take responsibility based on a shared vision, equal opportunity, ability to access expertise and knowledge for their own needs, and a capacity to affect positively their outcome of decisions which affect them. Kline,1994:1[1]

Many of us would agree that for too long we have taken the community out of schools and schools out of their communities with disastrous results for children and adults alike. Nurturing the four characteristics of a sustainable community can help reshape schools and make them more easily sustainable.

Sustainability, the ability to survive and prosper, is obviously crucial - because without it any organism, a community or a school, cannot continue to exist. Perhaps schools that have been closed, schools that are vulnerable to consolidation, and schools that have been under-funded do not meet these four criteria for sustainability. Perhaps schools can only become more viable by working towards greater sustainability.

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[1] Kline identifies indicators that show when these characteristics are present in a community. Some indicators utilize quantitative data such as the number of jobs in the community or the distance patients must travel for health care, but qualitative data based on how people perceive their job security, what they think about their jobs or their feeling about the availability of health care may be more indicative of the presence or absence of a characteristic of sustainability.

Economic Security:

At present, many residents of small rural communities see their schools as an economic drain on limited resources. Taxpayers are reluctant to approve mechanisms (such as bonds) to fund capital investments when they see little return on their money. Many schools are located far from the communities they serve and few offer residents easy access to facilities or incentives to use them. Many rural people think they pour money into schools only to have the products of this investment, the graduates, move away to find work. As a Selectman in rural Maine once told me, "We pay three times to educate our children. We feed, house and clothe them, we pay for their schooling, and then we pay when they move away and put all that education to use somewhere else."

To be seen as an asset worth protecting and investing in a school must increase the economic security of its community. There are many ways to do this - each community will find its own. Schools can encourage local and national businesses to set up small branches within the school, can teach entrepreneurialism, establish small student-run ventures within the school, and offer local and state incentives to attract businesses to a partnership. Schools should include activities that help diversify the local economy and create well-trained and motivated graduates who can continue to invest themselves in the community.

Ecological Integrity:

Many schools are poorly designed, both aesthetically and functionally, and badly constructed. Designs based on 'one-size fits all' end up not fitting anywhere. To increase a feeling of ownership by the community a school must be in harmony with its surroundings, reflecting in its design the culture, history, and materials the place in which it is located. William Bradley, an architect and former professor at the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design cites historian Christian Norberg Schultz, in making this point: "In general, the loss of things and place makes up a loss of 'world.' Modern man becomes 'worldless; and thus loses his own identity as well as the sense of community and participation," adding in his own words,

> The sense of community and participation is integral to our schools and we cannot afford to lose them. Schools must be places in which the students gains [sic] a sense of identity, the educational process becomes meaningful, the educational experience becomes exciting, and the learning environment is made to seem inviting. Further schools should reference the settings in which they are built and be places where the members of the educational community are made to feel secure and at home.
>
> Bradley, 1997: 4

The Seabird Island Elementary in British Columbia, Canada, by Paktau Architects of Vancouver, is a beautiful example of a school that honors the history and culture of it community, and is well-designed and sited, evoking:

> ...what was referred to in ancient times as *genius loci*, or a 'spirit of place." by Paktau Architects...for a community of Salish natives on the First National reservation, the school is consciously non-institutional in appearance. Its interior and exterior reference the Salish culture: traditional post and beam construction is used,

> portals are adorned with Salish carvings, and the exposed structure of the porch along the south facade evokes images of the racks used to dry the salmon that the Salish have traditionally harvested. Symbolically, the school is sited at the head of the community with its great roof providing shelter for the town from the severe winter months.
>
> Bradley,1997:4

An additional benefit is that schools that are well-sited and constructed using traditional materials and methods may be more cost-effective to heat, light, and maintain, than schools designed without consideration of the local environment.

Quality of Life:

Many rural people treasure a way of life that is not easily understood by urban and suburban people who have never experienced what it can mean to know neighbors and to live in a close relationship to nature. The school must add to the quality of the life of its community, as defined by the community. For example, rural communities that identified recreation as important have put health clubs, theaters, and auditoriums in schools that are available for community use. Other communities have put the town library within the school, creating a media center/library with computers and other technology that is available for students and adults. For example, as a result of a "student treasure hunt" to find local resources, the Lincoln High School West campus in Stockton, California, made land available to a fitness gym which built a new facility at the school which is now available to students and local residents (Bingler, 1998:4).

Quality of life can be defined in many ways, what is important is that the elements that people in a community value are reinforced in the school.

Empowerment and Responsibility:

Paulo Freire warns us "that to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (Freire, 1993:66). The "modern" school, based on a factory model, has in alienating students from the process of making decisions, objectified them. To meet the needs of rural society today and in the future it is imperative that students feel empowered and responsible. To counter feelings of fatalism, victimization, and second-class citizenship in the larger urban society, rural schools must encourage habits of thinking that are empowering. Sharing a vision, having equal opportunity and access to resources, taking responsibility, having a sense of agency in one's life; all these are important ways of thinking that can be nurtured within schools. School personnel can encourage values and beliefs that will help students contribute to the sustainability of their communities, deepening not only the students' own loyalty to their place but the commitment of the community to the school.

Strategies for Creating Sustainable Schools:

Gjelten identifies five types of rural community that share qualities of ruralness but differ in many important ways: 1) stable rural, 2) depressed rural, 3) high growth rural 4) re-born rural, and 5) isolated rural.[2] Stable communities,

[2] Gjelten, Tom, 1982:5-6

such as those based on traditional farming communities, have different strengths and vulnerabilities than rural communities that have lost an industry such as mining and are economically depressed. Resort areas that have attracted wealthy outsiders have different assets and problems than communities that have drawn "back-to-the landers" from congested cities or than poor communities isolated by geographic and cultural barriers. It is essential to remember the variation within rural communities in planning sustainable schools and communities.

Even a cursory review of the literature and available resources, including government agencies, private foundations, interest and trade groups, researchers reveals a broad range of assistance and expertise available to rural schools. Though most people interested in improving schooling deal with matters of curriculum, teacher training, program assessment, and accountability, there is considerable expertise focused on issues of infrastructure and facilities.

Researchers have suggested that the physical structure of a school reflects society's attitudes about children and education. Obviously physical structures do influence social structure. A building's design, construction, condition, and outfitting affect how students, teachers, and staff interact within the facility. The Government Accounting Office has shown that least a third of our schools condemn children to spending most of their day in inadequate facilities that show adults care little about their schooling.[3] To change this we

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[3] Government Printing Office, April, 1995, February, 1995, June 1996.

must change the way we think about schools and find ways to make them sustainable.

To create sustainable schools we must broaden the search for resources and ideas beyond the traditional confines of education. There are many reasons for this. Some people who were trained in administration and education reflect a way of thinking that has separated schools from their communities and led to their deterioration. Using other traditions and disciplines will help us break the bonds that limit our thinking now. Architects, economists, ecologists, community planners, business entrepreneurs, government agencies in other fields, and community development workers have ideas and resources that, applied to education, will create exciting possibilities and partnerships. Funding as well may flow from a variety of sources to include not only from taxes, but existing businesses and new student-run ventures, private donations, the rental of space and equipment, and government agencies that have not traditionally funded schools.

The first step in dealing with a poorly functioning school is assessing community assets. Assessment is often limited to the structure itself, and though this is an essential part of the process as is an assessment of needs, communities must look beyond the school walls to discover assets that can be used to improve the school and link it to the community to make each more sustainable. For example, in rural resort areas, visitors and people who have second homes can be a resource for expertise and funding. In such places it makes sense to create a trust to which these people could donate from private

assets and through their businesses or foundations as was done in Tremont, Maine through creation of the Tremont School Fund.[4] Because in resort communities there is usually a shortage of affordable housing, particularly in the "season," school buildings might be constructed or renovated to be usable as small apartments or dormitories in the summer.

A depressed rural area might qualify for EZ/EC designation or as a CDC eligible for federal funding. Although traditionally money from these sources has not been used for schools, there is some evidence that it could be. Government agencies on the state and local levels might offer tax abatement or other incentives that would attract business investment (much as the Republic of Ireland has done). Agencies such as USDA and HUD might fund programs that improve infrastructure and facilities in schools located in rural communities as USDA Rural Development has done in Henderson, Minnesota by guaranteeing a loan for New Country School.

In many stable rural places there may be existing facilities and programs that could serve education. Schools can be created in historic buildings, museums, businesses, or libraries, with many benefits to students. For example, the Henry Ford Academy, a charter school located within the Henry Ford Museum

> ...is a premiere model of synergy resulting in economy and sustainability. It is an example of a project coming to life because of everyone having a stake in it. The Henry Ford Motor Company knows that the success of the future global workforce will require innovation and ingenuity. As for the museum, it was Henry Ford's idea to that the artifacts he collected would be used to provide the

[4] Lawrence, Barbara Kent. Working Memory: The Influence of Culture on Aspirations, dissertation, Boston University, 1998.

> backbone of a broad based education in both the academic and practical disciplines. When he created the museum in 1920 to honor his mentor, Thomas Edison, Ford felt that part of the museum's mission would always be to house a public school within its walls. The Wayne County school district is interested in exploring new models of learning and recognizes the important benefits of working with the corporate community, where most of its student will eventually apply the lessons of their educational labors.
>
> Bingler, 1998:4

Businesses that could help diversify the economy, such as MBNA in Camden Maine, or retirement centers built in association with schools like Deer Valley Unified School District in Phoenix, Arizona, partnered with developer Del Webb, might be drawn to rural places offering security, a strong work ethic, an attractive way of life, a well-educated work force, tax incentives, and an on-going partnership with the schools.

Isolated rural communities may also be eligible for federal and state money usually allocated to other types of development. Again, government agencies might become partners in creating schools by guaranteeing loans, or creating special zones of development. Remote communities may want to build on the asset of their isolation, for example, by creating businesses based on low-impact eco-tourism, planned and operated by students with appropriate supervision.

There are many examples of such partnerships that have enriched schools and made them a powerful asset in their communities and a source of sustainability. We need to highlight those examples and create new ways to make partnerships that foster schools and communities linked in enduring relationships in which each helps sustain the other.

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